



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Peter Thompson, *Associate Rector for Formation & Liturgy*

## Everyday God

*Sermon preached at the seven o'clock service, April 1, 2021*

*Maundy Thursday*

*Based on Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35*

*Christ our Savior, Redeemer of the World: on the night before you died, you gathered with your friends for a meal. Kneeling before them, you washed their feet; breaking bread, you offered them your body; sharing a cup, you gave them your blood. Inspire your Church to be as humble and as generous as you. Amen.*

How far would you go for God? From the dawn of history, human beings have gone to great lengths in order to find God and prove themselves worthy of God's attention and acceptance. Some have trekked to distant lands, assuming that, if they searched with enough intensity, they would eventually discover the one true path to the source of all holiness. They've climbed mountains, hoping to see God at the top. They've examined relics, attempting to discern the will of God through ancient objects. They've visited shrines, scouring every crevice for a hint of a deity. They've consulted with gurus and other spiritual experts, asking profound questions about enlightenment and truth.

Others have cloistered themselves away from the world, confident in their conviction that the journey to God must take place within. They've withdrawn from personal relationships and given up their worldly possessions as a way of eliminating distractions from their all-important mission. They've imposed upon themselves drastic discipline, fasting, praying and laboring continuously so that, by living correctly, they might become holy enough for God. They've pursued mystical experiences, contorting their bodies, ingesting substances, and reciting incantations in an effort to welcome a vision of the divine.

Some have tried to reach God through achievement and success. They've painted masterpieces, composed symphonies, and written long books, grasping at ultimate transcendence through literature, music, and art. They've earned sterling credentials from elite academic institutions attesting to their deep understanding of the mysteries of the universe. They've risen up hierarchies in church, commerce, and state, believing that, by amassing more power and authority for themselves, they could get closer to the Almighty.

Others have tried to bring the sacred to earth by transforming the world around them. They've worked for justice and equality, freedom and peace. They've advocated for the vulnerable and the persecuted. They've fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and cared for the sick. They've built new kinds of communities shaped by the teachings of their religious traditions. They've made changes in the government and other institutions of society so that God's people might better reflect God's image.

Many of these avenues have taken spiritual seekers to their desired destination. People have found God on mountaintops and on pilgrimages, through prayer and meditation practices, in their artistic and literary endeavors, and in the hard work of social change. Perhaps you or someone you know has successfully encountered God through sheer determination and intentional effort. But sometimes our attempts to go

the distance for God don't result in the outcome we want. We travel halfway across the world and realize it's not any more sacred than the place we just left. We pray and pray and pray and hear nothing in response. We amass all the success in the world and still feel empty inside. Our exertions can even backfire, dragging us further away from the Holy One we say we seek. Acts of religious violence often begin with an interest in doing God's will but end in a form of destruction no deity worth their salt would ever condone. Untold damage has been done by Christians who have striven mightily to change LGBTQ+ people instead of accepting them as God's gifts, just as they are.

Maundy Thursday reminds us that we don't have to go anywhere or do anything to find God or to prove ourselves worthy of God's lavish grace. God is already here among us. God is the generous host, offering nourishment to hungry guests. God is the lowly servant, doing the dirty, humiliating work that no one else wants to do. God is the affectionate lover, tenderly caressing human bodies. God is the anxious insomniac, pleading for companionship in the midst of struggle. God is the betrayed friend, an undeserving victim of a duplicitous scheme. God is the pawn of an unjust system, jailed by corrupt actors who care only about maintaining their control. God is even bread, the common food staple made of flour and water, and wine, the unremarkable beverage served at almost every meal. We focus so much of our energy on the God up ahead, the God we have yet to discover and achieve, that we miss the God who is already an integral part of our experience, who has been right in front of us all along. The hymnwriter Brian Wren addresses God with these words: "We strain to glimpse your mercy-seat, yet find you kneeling at our feet."<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus tells us to follow his example in loving one another, when he instructs us to wash each other's feet as he has washed ours, when he directs us to break bread and drink wine continually in remembrance of him, he opens our eyes to the sacredness of everyday life. On the night before he died, when the disciples were hanging on his every word, he could have outlined a far-flung quest and asked them to go; he could have handed down a long theological treatise and instructed them to read; he could have concocted a magical potion and told them to drink; he could have dictated his master plan for world domination and assigned them their roles. But Jesus didn't do any of those things. The path to holiness, he suggested to his disciples, is not all that rigorous or outlandish. Look around at your friends gathered here, he said.<sup>2</sup> My deepest desire is that you care for them. Practice humility with each other whenever you can. And keep remembering me in the common, in the simple, in the everyday. That should be enough.

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325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022

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<sup>1</sup> "Great God, Your Love Has Called Us Here," <https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw2596.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> I have long been struck by Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon for Ascension Day, "Looking Up Toward Heaven" (found in *Gospel Medicine*, p. 79-85), which encourages listeners to look for God in one's friends/fellow disciples.